



25 May 1988

MEMORANDUM FOR: Chairman, National Intelligence Council

FROM: Charles E. Allen
National Intelligence Officer/Warning

SUBJECT: National Intelligence Warning

REFERENCE: Your Comments, Bi-Weekly Warning Report, 4 May 1988

1. First, I wish to thank you for your candid comments on the Bi-Weekly Report. You make some very valid points. However, I especially want to comment on your views on warning. A continuing dialogue should help us reach a mutual understanding on the warning issue. My staff and I welcome the feedback that we are receiving, both on the Bi-Weekly as well as role and mission responsibilities of the NIO/W.

2. Warning has always been an inherently ambiguous and contentious function, and one for which there is no obvious or completely satisfactory institutional mechanism. As Harry Cochran has pointed out, the "solutions" of the past decade--the NIO for Warning and the Strategic (now National) Warning Staff--have in some ways both aggravated and obscured the problem. Based on my review of the warning role, neither the DCI nor the NFIB have ever had a clear concept of the mission of the NWS and the NIO/W. They have never come to grips with the question of duplication of responsibilities and functions by the NIO/W and SWS, on the one hand, and the regional NIOs, the DI, and the Community as a whole, on the other. I have, however, no problem with your "working definition"; it is generally consonant with that set forth in the current DCID on warning. I believe, however, that the threshold you set for warning--potential developments requiring specific policy action or decision--is too high and too narrow. Experience suggests that it is not particularly meaningful or helpful to postulate that warning must have "policy/action implications," otherwise it is only "entertainment." It would be hard to find intelligence officers or analysts who did not feel that the developments or topics they were seized with did not deserve policy attention.


3. As I see it, the central issue is how to distinguish the warning responsibilities of the NIO/W from those of the regional NIOs and the DI generally. This issue, of course, arises from the nature of the warning itself and from the current institutional arrangements for performing the function. The DCID specifically assigns major responsibilities for warning to the NIOs. It is this allocation of responsibility that creates what you call the "squishy issue" of the NIO/W's role "as a warner" I find,

~~SECRET~~

however, little solace or clarification when you suggest that the NIO/W has a "special role as a warner only if his special perspective allows him to provide warning that others are suppressing or overlooking." I strongly contend that the notion the NIO/W must explain why the warning is coming from him and not other responsible officers as untenable. Moreover, this highly restrictive definition of the NIO/W's role is a recipe for either passivity and inaction, certainly not for clarity of the mission.

4. In the best of worlds, this "squishy issue" would have been tackled long ago--not evaded, ignored, and mythologized. The DCI and NFIB would have recognized the ambiguity and confusion created by present arrangements and assumptions, and the mechanism clarified or altered. Assuming that senior management will not review or recommend revisions in existing arrangements, the problem is how to articulate a clear and useful function for the NIO/W, and one that would be generally acceptable to the other NIOs and interested players elsewhere. It seems to me that, at least in the substantive dimensions of the mission, the NIO/W's present role and activities already satisfy this requirement of a clear, useful, and acceptable function, although your comments imply that you would set the threshold of what qualifies as warning considerably higher than is now the case.

5. My conclusion is that the issue of where to draw the threshold and the related problems of what you refer to as "dilettantism" and "off-the-wall judgments" deserve thoughtful attention. These issues go to the heart of how one defines warning: is it essentially a briefing function that is distinguished from current intelligence primarily by stronger emphasis on "heads up," "lean forward," or even "worst case" content? Or is it a more unique and specialized mission tailored exclusively for the most senior policy levels and therefore highly selective, discriminating, and succinct in the choice of warning topics? The choice between these two alternative conceptions obviously should be a matter for the highest intelligence authorities, if not the NSC itself. In the usual absence of voices from these quarters, it would be helpful to seek a general consensus within the NIC so that all hands at least have a chance to sing from the same score. Ideally, a consensus definition of the mission would clarify the nature of briefing vehicles and the frequency of briefings. If a consensus endorsed existing functions, should we continue to issue a regular publication or would the special character of warning be conveyed more effectively by ad hoc issuances? What are the pluses and minuses of the bi-weekly format and schedule? Of a shift to more selective, aperiodic ad hoc issuances? These are some of the issues that I suggest we continue to examine and to discuss in the days ahead. Meanwhile, I suggest we continue our dialogue.

- 
Charles E. Allen

cc: VC/NIC
A/NIO/W